



Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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BAGGING THE THANKSGIVING BIRD IS NOT ALWAYS A SURE THING

By Lowell Washburn
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

I was starting to feel the pressure. Thanksgiving day was just around the corner and my Holiday turkey was still roaming the Iowa woodlands.

Most shotgun hunters already know that bagging America's most elusive game bird is, at best, a tricky proposition. Attempting to take one with a bow and arrow is even more frustrating. Last Saturday offered a good example of what I'm talking about.

It was late in the afternoon before I turned onto the field access that leads to one of my favorite stands of mature oaks. Turkeys often roost here, and I was optimistic as I popped up the portable blind and hurriedly placed my half dozen decoys. I settled in to wait for sunset -- or turkeys -- whichever came first.

I had been in the blind less than twenty minutes when I spotted a lone gobbler about 100 yards distant. Although the bird appeared to be headed my way, I soon lost sight of him in the maze of tree trunks and gooseberries. Several minutes later he suddenly materialized less than thirty yards away.

Upon stepping out of the underbrush, the regal gobbler came face to face with my flock of plastic effigies. Puffing his feathers and fanning his tail, the old tom instantly

assumed the classic 'Thanksgiving pose' and began a stiff-legged march straight toward the decoys. As he approached, the gobbler began to emit a never ending series of fighting purrs which belied his intent to teach the decoys a lesson in territorial respect.

When the turkey reached the fifteen yard line, I quietly brought the bow to full draw. Then, just as I was about to loose the arrow, something went wrong. The gobbler suddenly came out of the strut, tightened his feathers, and began to quickly walk away. Fighting purrs had now been replaced with alarm putts.

The party was over and the moment of truth had arrived. It was now or never. I fired the arrow. The shot was a clean miss and the gobbler vanished into the growing shadows.

The next morning found me 10 miles away sitting in the same pop-up blind in another block of mature timber. It was still a half hour or so before sunrise when the turkeys began to stir. It was still half dark when the loudly yelping birds began leaving their tree top roosts. Unfortunately, most of the turkeys were gliding to a clearing fifty or sixty yards away. In an effort to lure the birds in my direction, I reached into my pack and dug out the box call. Hand-crafted from native woods by Moscow, Iowa's Robert Kirkman, the call almost sounds more like a wild turkey than the bird itself.

Grasping the box call's wooden paddle, I began to loudly belt out a greeting. The turkeys began to answer, and the woods soon rocked with the chaos of our two way conversation. I happened to glance back to the decoys and there, much to my amazement, was a lone turkey standing smack in the middle of the fake flock. The Kirkman squawker must have sounded as good as the competition and the turkey had apparently decided to sail in to the decoys instead of joining the real birds.

Drawing the bow, I took careful aim and let fire. The arrow hit a twig that I hadn't seen in the poor light. Another miss. Strike two.

It was late afternoon and I had relocated to a third woodlot. In spite of the previous encounters, I remained optimistic. I mean how many things can possibly go wrong on a turkey hunt?

It was nearly sunset when a herd of turkeys suddenly appeared over the hilltop to my right. I started yelping and the flock -- sixteen birds in all -- immediately began moving in my direction. The birds were mostly jakes and, they too, were eager to establish a pecking order with the decoys. I had already pulled the bow to full draw as the first jake squared off with the decoys. The lighting was good and this time I had made sure there were no twigs to deflect the shot. I released the string, and my Thanksgiving dinner was in the bag.

Young and tender, the jake dressed out at eleven pounds. But the real thrill was in the privilege of being able to observe the magnificent wild turkey in its native habitat. As always, I felt extremely fortunate to pursue this most elusive and traditional of all

Holiday meals.

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ANTLERLESS DEER SEASON BEGINS FRIDAY IN MANY IOWA COUNTIES

DES MOINES – The new three-day antlerless deer November season opens Friday. The new season is an inducement to hunters to harvest antlerless deer in counties with a higher than desired deer population.

Hunters are allowed to use a bow, shotgun, muzzleloader or handgun. Licenses for the Nov. 25 – 27 season went on sale Nov. 12.

“The purpose for waiting until Nov. 12, was to allow the season in the counties where we need to harvest more antlerless deer,” said Dale Garner, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources wildlife bureau.

All antlerless licenses were sold out in 36 counties prior to Nov. 12, meaning these counties will not be participating in the November hunt. Since Nov. 12, another 14 counties have sold out.

“Our staff as well as our conservation officers will be out this weekend monitoring how the hunt is going, and making sure that only antlerless deer are being harvested,” Garner said.

To see if licenses are available, go to www.iowadnr.com and click on licensing, then on Current Availability of Limited Quota Deer and Turkey Licenses, then on Resident Antlerless Deer By County.

There are plenty of antlerless deer licenses available in southern Iowa.

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RADIO WALLEYES

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Prowling the edge of the wing dam, we went just a few minutes without success. Then, one appeared. A quick dip in the water and Caleb Schnitzler pulled nearly five-pound walleye on board. This one would be going right back in the water shortly; along with the three *bigger* ones that followed on the Mississippi River, upstream from Sabula, in Jackson County.

First, though, each had a short date on the on-board operating table. After each thick, bronze fish was anesthetized, measured and weighed; a careful belly incision was made. As Schnitzler held it steady, Department of Natural Resources fisheries technician Dennis Weiss slid a slender radio transmitter into place. Another smaller puncture, an inch or so behind the incision, allowed an 18-inch antenna to trail behind the fish. About the size of a 20-gauge shotgun shell, the transmitter disappeared as Weiss quickly tied three sutures to close the wound. After a few minutes, each walleye ‘came to’ and was slid back into the water.

From here, they’re marked fish—electronically speaking. For the next two to three years, research workers at the DNR’s Bellevue fisheries station will track the lunkers; across winter ice and through summer heat. “We want to find out what kind of habitat these fish utilize in the winter,” explained Weiss. “It’s normally deep water areas, behind certain wing dams. We want to protect those areas.”

The wide Mississippi might spread for many miles, but *quality* habitat is hard to come by in a harsh winter. Perhaps the bigger concern, though, comes as ice breaks up in April and walleyes move into shallows. “We’ve documented two main spawning grounds in this pool. We want to make sure the fish continue to spawn in those sites, to protect them,” said Weiss. Each half-mile stretch lies on an outside bend, letting the current scour away sediment. Left behind is the sand/gravel substrate and strong water flow walleyes need for spawning.

This radio tracking has been underway since the early 1980s. For the last 10 years or so, crews have planted transmitters in 15 to 20 more big walleyes. Over the years, the equipment has become more sophisticated. The transmitters are smaller but stronger. The equipment—such as hovercraft in the winter—is more adaptable to the river. However, the aim is the same. Learn more about walleyes, and the environs they require. “All the walleyes on the Mississippi River are naturally reproducing walleyes. We’re not stocking them from our hatcheries,” noted Weiss. “We have to ensure we continue to have good numbers of brood fish.”

With the mix of fish, wildlife and human involvement, it’s critical that those high priority areas are identified. Barge fleeting areas, a river terminal or some other development are better suited away from the fragile spawning areas, for instance. Reduced bag limits and a slot limit on walleyes place some of the burden on anglers, too. “We’re going to have better walleye fishing with good spawning success with these fish,” said Weiss. “They need specific spawning areas and specific wintering areas.”

Sidebar: Wing Dam Walleyes

Though fisheries workers Dennis Weiss and Caleb Schnitzler were turning their ‘catch’ loose after the onboard transmitter work, it’s worth it to notice *where* those big ones came from. While a dozen boats bobbed just below the tailwaters in late fall—and with those tailwaters off limits beginning December 1 on several pools—the DNR crew

headed downstream for the big walleyes they needed to carry the transmitters for two or three years.

With a south wind blowing upstream, Weiss guided the boat along the telltale calm, then ripple which indicated a wing dam just below. “We find a lot of big ones on the upstream side of the wing dam,” hinted Weiss. “Below the dam its too deep for our electroshocking. On the top, though, that water gets ‘squeezed’ in effect. There might be eight feet of water pushing downstream, but that wingdam only lets about three feet of water over...and with it, the gizzard shad and minnows walleyes are after.”

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SNOWMOBILE, ATV REGISTRATIONS DUE JAN. 3

DES MOINES – Owners of snowmobiles or all-terrain vehicles (ATV) must renew their registrations for 2006, by Jan. 3. Registration renewal is conducted at the county recorder’s office in the county where the machine owner resides.

Iowa law requires snowmobiles and ATVs used on public land or ice to be registered. Iowa accepts machines with current registrations from other states and countries. ATVs and snowmobiles used exclusively as farm implements are exempted from the requirement.

Registration information must be kept current, including changes of address. Machine owners must update the registration information with the county recorder within 30 days of changing addresses.

Registration is \$15 per machine, plus a writing fee. Money collected from ATV and snowmobile registrations go into a fund used to support programs for each activity.

For more information, contact the local county recorder, or the Iowa Department of Natural Resources at 515-281-5918.

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GIVE THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GROWING

Give a unique gift to the person who is difficult to buy for this holiday season, a gift of native trees and shrubs. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources State Forest Nurseries in Ames and Montrose raise high quality native tree and shrub conservation seedlings for Iowa residents to plant on their lands, whether it is a backyard, small acreage or larger landholding.

State foresters, with the help of several environmental and sportsmen's organizations, have designed five packets of native trees and shrubs seedlings for purchase this holiday season. The packets promote and encourage the planting of native trees and shrubs for songbird and wildlife habitat.

Songbird Packet – 20 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$20, including shipping, for a larger backyard habitat project. The Songbird Packet includes two bur oaks, two white pines, four wild plum, four chokecherry, four gray dogwoods and four serviceberry. This packet is recommended by Audubon Iowa.

Turkey Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. This packet provides mast trees for one-half to one-acre planting and includes 50 bur oak, 50 white oak, 50 pin oak and 50 gray dogwoods. This packet is recommended by the Iowa Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Pheasant Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. This packet provides food and winter cover and includes 50 redcedar, 50 wild plums, 50 ninebark and 50 gray dogwoods. This packet is recommended by the Iowa Pheasants Forever chapters.

Quail Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. This packet provides food and winter cover and includes 100 wild plum and 100 gray dogwood and is recommended by Iowa DNR wildlife biologists.

Create Your Own Packet – 200 trees (8 to 24 inches tall) for \$90. Choose up to four different species available in units of 50 plants for your own special wildlife design.

Shipping for larger packets directly to gift recipients' door in the spring is \$10 per packet. The recipient can also pick the trees up directly from the State Nursery in late April to mid May for no charge.

To receive this holiday gift certificate in time for the holidays, orders must be received by Dec. 20. Orders are accepted by phone, e-mail or mail. The State Nursery will send a gift certificate to the recipient and identify whom the gift was from.

These specialty packets would also make a nice housewarming gift, and can be purchased for personal use.

To order or for more information about the packets and gift certificate, call the State Forest Nursery at 1-800-865-2477 or go on line to www.iowadnr.com/forestry/

Please support our efforts to expand songbird and wildlife habitat for today and for tomorrow by giving a gift that keeps growing.

For more information, contact John Walkowiak, chief of the Iowa DNR's forestry bureau, at 515-242-5966, or by e-mail at john.walkowiak@dnr.state.ia.us.

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REAL CHRISTMAS TREES ARE GOOD FOR ENVIRONMENT

At the turn of the 20th century, President Teddy Roosevelt and his young sons learned that real Christmas trees are not only an important family tradition, but are also good for the environment.

During the first Christmas as President, Teddy Roosevelt, being a strong conservationist, banned Christmas trees from the White House saying it was a waste. Missing the fresh smell and wanting the Christmas spirit in the White House, Roosevelt's young sons sneaked in a Christmas tree. Once the President found out, he asked his good friend, forester and Chief of the US Forest Service Gifford Pinchot, to talk with his sons on the waste of a good tree.

Pinchot explained to the surprise of the President and to his sons that growing Christmas trees was in fact good conservation, by using marginal cropland, reducing soil erosion, creating wildlife habitat and contributing to local economies. From that time on, the Roosevelt family as well as the White House, has always had a real tree during the holiday season.

Last year, more than 250,000 real trees were purchased in Iowa from local retail lots or nearby Christmas tree farms. Scotch pine, white pine, and Fraser fir are most popular.

"Approximately 55,000 Christmas trees purchased last year were from the approximately 600 family run Christmas tree farms, contributing more than \$1 million to our state's economy," said John Walkowiak, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources forestry bureau.

"If you desire a family adventure this season, plan on going to a local Christmas tree farm to choose and cut your own Iowa grown Christmas tree," Walkowiak said. "Look for a tree that will fit your home, has a straight trunk and great color. Local Christmas tree growers will loan you a saw and help get it to your car."

For the location of the closest Christmas tree farm check out the State Horticulturist's web site www.agriculture.state.ia.us/christmastree.asp.

If purchasing a cut Christmas tree from a local retail lot, these simple steps can make it easier to choose a fresh Christmas tree that is right for your family.

Hold a branch about 4 to 6 inches from the tips between your thumb and forefinger and pull your hand towards you. As the branch slips through your fingers, needles should stay on the branch and not fall off in your hand.

Bump the base of the tree on the ground. Dry green needles should not fall off in great numbers, but loss of brown needles is normal.

“Once you get your tree home, remember to make a fresh cut on the base and place in a Christmas tree holder that can hold plenty of water to keep the tree fresh. A fresh Christmas tree, given adequate water and kept away from heat can stay in your home through the holidays,” Walkowiak said.

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